

'Being within reach'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Here is stand knocking at the door; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and he and I will eat together. – Rev.3,20

Collect:

Almighty God, you sent your Holy Spirit to be the life and light of your Church. Open our hearts to the riches of your grace, that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love, joy, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Before the world began – by JBell and GMaule based on Jn.1,1-13

Before the world began
one Word was there;
grounded in God he was,
rooted in care;
by him all things were made,
in him was love displayed,
through him God spoke and said,
I am for you.

Life found in him its source,
death found its end;
light found in him its course,
darkness its friend;
for neither death nor doubt
nor darkness can put out
the glow of God, the shout:
I am for you.

The Word was in the world
which from him came;
unrecognised he was,

unknown by name;
one with all humankind,
with the unloved aligned,
convincing sight and mind:
I am for you.

All who received the Word
by God were blessed;
sisters and brothers they
of earth's fond guest.
So did the Word of Grace
proclaim in time and space,
I am for you.

Reading: **James 1, 1-12**

Sermon:

Dear friends

By describing the church, and the Christians he writes to, as "*scattered among the nations*", James characterises the situation of Christianity in a particular way which is as relevant for us as it was for those to whom he wrote. For the question that the word "scattered" implies is as relevant for us as it was for them: Are they who are scattered reachable still? Are they reachable still for what brought them together at first? For what defined their mission and strengthened and encouraged them for it? Are they reachable still for what made them what they are? Are they reachable still for that which grounded and centred their lives in the power and truth of their calling and their purpose?

This, dear friends, is the question upon which everything else hangs, and it therefore belongs to the *first things* we must look at in the quest for genuine Christianity. We are "*scattered among the nations*" which means that this question is facing us: Are we reachable still for that which makes vital, genuine Christianity, creates it and brings it into being, sustains it, grows it, refines it? Are we reachable still for God's Word – the gospel of Jesus Christ, his word that we are to keep, the 'laws and prophets' of Scripture that point to him?

Jesus says, '*The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me*' (Jn.18,37) Are we on the side of truth still in the sense of being reachable for God's Word? Only when we are is the situation of being "*scattered among the nations*" a promising one. But that is all-dependent on whether what reaches us still is God's Word.

You see, the church to which James wrote originally had suffered the trauma of persecution. It was scattered in the sense that it had been severed and ejected from its centre Jerusalem and forced to flee in order to escape death. Through these persecutions the church's enemy had hoped to deal the church and Christianity a mortal blow (they were the first but by no means the last to try – still going on!). And it might have done the trick. It might have had the desired effect of finishing or at least

decidedly weakening the church by making the point that faith was clearly too costly a proposition. But it didn't. Instead what happened was that the church grew in new places and spread further. The attempt to kill the fire by separating and isolating the embers resulted instead in many new fires. And what was the reason for that but this: that the church remained reachable for God's Word. Had that not been the case, the result would have been different, the scattering of the church would have led to its weakening.

Herein lie the "*trials of many kinds*" that the church (genuine Christianity!) is faced with and which the church ought to be conscious of as something positive. The nature of these trials is about this: whether the church keeps being reachable for God's Word, administered through word and sacrament, or whether it yields to pressures and temptations that prevent this.

Now, by saying '*Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds*', James is telling us to do two things.

One is, to be conscious of when faith is tested and in what way. That is:

Be conscious of it when the Word of God is taken from you and is shifted from the centre, or when, conversely, you are being led away from the Word;

be conscious of it when the Word of God and the knowledge of it (!) is assigned a marginal role within Christianity and no neglect or false representation of it ever amounts to a serious problem; be conscious of it when real-time communication with God's Word isn't happening while the matter of faith and trust is believed to be unaffected by it;

be conscious of it when religious experience trumps truth, the words "I feel" trump the word "God says";

be conscious of the disagreement between the worlds' way of knowing good and evil and that of God's Word, between the worlds' concept of redemption and that of God, and of the pressure to be in conflict with God's Word so as not to be in conflict with the world.

It is, or should be, sobering to realise that biblical illiteracy has been rising within the church in recent times, but it should be deeply alarming to observe that it doesn't seem to worry us overly much. How can this be? Because what is Christianity and where is Christianity going, when it ceases to be reachable for God's Word?

The answer is – and some of it is looking at us from various quarters in the church, with victory in its eyes! - it becomes reachable for the world's voice, ways and aims as it becomes less capable of doing what God says. The church goes along with the world of the day instead of being on the side of the truth that God has revealed in Christ so that it should be a light to the world!

We need to be conscious of these things, dear friends, let us all examine ourselves. Where in order to avoid conflict with the world and with our wrongful fears and desires we put ourselves at a distance to the clearly perceived judgment of God's Word, there our reachability for God's Word will diminish, and so must our capability to do what it says. When this happens, we must not stay/remain in this attitude but repent of it and entrust ourselves to Christ and the renewing strength of his grace.

Paul's advice to Timothy brings out clearly for all of us the need and importance of being reachable for God's Word: "*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy*

Scripture, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2Tim.3,14-15). It is this ‘being made wise for salvation’ of Paul’s that is behind James’ use of the word ‘joy’ in considering these trials.

This is the second point. Why not just consider these trials and be conscious of their testing character, but do so by embracing the challenge with joy? It is simply because coming through these trials we grow. They teach us to listen to God’s Word more carefully and more fully, in a more engaged way, out of a need that opens our eyes to God’s grace, to Christ, and guides our hope to him.

That is why James says that these kinds of trials produce perseverance: They make you persevere with God’s Word, which means that you persevere with that which in turn ‘makes you wise for salvation’, or as James puts it: *‘so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.’*

Dear friends, let perseverance, then, finish its work, in repentance and faith being reachable always for God’s Word.

‘Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.’

AMEN

Lord God, we thank you for your Word in Jesus Christ which makes us wise for salvation. When we are tempted to let it go and not heed it, to put our wisdom above your judgments or to bend your word to suit our ill-conceived interests and desires, help us see what is happening and give us grace and strength to change course. Let it not sit right with us to hear your word but not do it. We commit our ways to you as we seek to persevere in the truth which your word reveals so that Christ may be honoured in our hearts more fully to the praise and glory of your name. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gift of His blessings]

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN
